

Oswald: A brother's burden

Through 34 years of stress, Robert Oswald has stood steadfastly by his family name in the shadow of that infamous day in Dallas.

This article was published on Sunday, November 16, 1997

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WICHITA FALLS, Texas -- At night, when it falls dark and quiet in the house and a tired Robert Oswald finds himself alone, the dream still sometimes finds him.

He sees himself alongside his younger brother, Lee, in a grim room with only a desk and a note pad. He hears himself ordering the smaller man to sit down and write an explanation for why he killed John F. Kennedy. Amazingly, Lee obeys. He sits at the desk, writing, writing, writing furiously, while big brother paces.

Finally, the enigma finishes. He stands and, as Robert tells it, "He's about to hand me this paper when he says, 'Just a minute.' He looks at his writing on the paper, then tears it all up and throws it away. And he looks at me and says, 'I don't know why.' And I think it will always be that he doesn't know why. I think that's the truth of it."

A third of a century after the 35th U.S. president's assassination in Dallas, some things do not change. When a puzzled grandchild asks Robert Oswald whether he has any brothers or sisters, the house falls funereally hushed, holding its breath with the occupants. When the leaves begin falling, he and his wife, Vada, monitor ever more closely their visiting grandchildren's television viewing, just as they did their own children's. They keep ears open for any program with a reference to Oswald, or Lee, or Lee Harvey.

Autumn is the season for new TV documentaries and books about Robert's dead brother, the time for revamped conspiracy theories and for strangers' bizarre phone calls. He braces himself for the exploiters and crackpots who will want a piece of him. November is hard.

As with his own children during that first November in 1963, 63-year-old Robert Oswald does not talk to his grandchildren about either the assassination or their great-uncle Lee. To do so, he reasons, would only cause them confusion and worry. He believes his brother killed President Kennedy, alone and irrationally. Just the same, it hurts terribly to say so.

"You can either light a situation or defuse it, and we chose a long time ago to [defuse] it," he says. "Why put all of that on kids?"

If a man is not the reputed presidential assassin, but the surviving brother who must live with the name, how do he and his family do it when the name is Oswald?

In the aftermath of Nov. 22, 1963, Robert Oswald could have avoided the question, along with many worries, merely by changing his name at age 29. It was something that a variety of people, including a Secret Service agent, urged him to do -- because the name Oswald swiftly had become like that of John Wilkes Booth a century earlier in the rage it triggered.

But while Oswalds unrelated to the family were reportedly becoming Smiths and Joneses all over Texas and elsewhere in America, Robert Oswald never considered the possibility of a name change.

His name was his father's and grandfather's, after all. The Oswald family tree dated back to colonial times. He'd learned as a child that he was a fifth or sixth cousin of Gen. Robert E. Lee,

which explained why he had been named Robert Edward Lee Oswald Jr., and his little brother Lee Harvey Oswald. To change his name would have amounted to a betrayal of his heritage, he believed.

He snaps his fingers loudly. "I mean I didn't think about changing it for that long, OK?" he says, the "OK" for emphasis.

This is the former Marine's way when he's intense, his deep blue eyes flashing behind glasses, and then, like a furnace burner going from ON to OFF, the eyes dim and cool. His fingers rake his sparse gray hair, his tensed shoulders settle back into his chair. He grins companionably. By nature, he is affable, soft-spoken, gentle, a chronic laughter, utterly without pretense.

When a stranger calls the house, skeptically asking whether the casual-sounding man on the other end of the phone with the twang part-Texan and part-Cajun could possibly be Robert Oswald, the Robert Oswald, the brother of Lee Oswald, the object of the chase chuckles by reflex. He says in the cheery, peppy voice of the brick salesman he was, "Hi. You got him. That's me."

## **STEELED FOR HARD TIMES**

Two weeks after the assassination, he made himself return to his job as a sales coordinator for a brick company in Denton, 30 miles outside of Dallas. He would neither run nor deny he was an Oswald. Neither he nor his family was guilty of anything, he kept telling those closest to him. A childhood spent in and out of orphanages had prepared him for hard times and steeled his belief in, among other things, his ability to get along with people and survive the worst of circumstances.

Away from the brick lot, however, uncertainty gripped him. During the weekend after John F. Kennedy's murder, President Lyndon B. Johnson had ordered the Secret Service to provide the Oswald family around-the-clock protection at their home in Denton. A couple of weeks later, believing the Oswalds to be safe, the Service bid them goodbye. The family was alone.

One night, after visiting friends in Fort Worth, Oswald was driving his wife and two children back home to Denton when he saw the flashing lights of a police car in his rear-view mirror. He stepped out of his vehicle to be confronted by a towering state trooper, who informed him he had a defective headlight. License and registration, please. The trooper inspected his license, then glanced down at him. "Robert, are you Lee's brother?"

"Yes, sir."

He felt unmasked. So here it was. Welcome to the future. Hello to his new life as leper, maybe. The big trooper kept looking him over. "We're like two peas in a pot," Lee once had told Robert in his mangled syntax, part of a letter from the Soviet Union in which Lee recounted how he'd described their physical resemblance to his curious new Russian wife, Marina.

The observation was at least half true. While Robert was slightly taller at 5 feet 10 inches, and had a far more robust build than his slight brother, their faces had a similarly long shape. Their blue eyes took on a hooded, almost sleepy quality when sad or pensive. Looking at one of them as a young man would always remind a stranger of the other. The trooper scrutinized him. Robert braced himself. The cop said, "Robert, I want you to know something. My wife and I have prayed for your family."

In retelling the story 34 years later, Bob Oswald's voice quavers. His jaw line trembles violently. He is a tough Marine veteran of Korea, a man unaccustomed to displays of emotion around strangers. His blue eyes bat and keep batting now, and he looks up at the ceiling a little helplessly, as if stunned by this reaction from himself, perhaps mortified. He excuses himself to walk out of his den and stand ramrod-straight in the kitchen, drinking a glass of tap water, flicking at his eyes, looking off with the mile-long stare he sometimes gets.

Just as abruptly as he left it, he returns to the den and sits back down.

"Copacetic," he says crisply. This means, let's go. This means he is OK and can resume talking. This means, among other things, that life since 1963 has been a regular exercise in keeping things copacetic.

"None of us really knew what was going to happen back then," he says. "I'd already thought of alternate landing places for us [to live]. ... But, not long after the [assassination], we had so many kind letters from strangers and friends. ... You learn so much about the decency of people. We had phone calls from friends and neighbors and strangers asking us if we needed anything, people saying they were thinking of us. For the first time ever in my life, I felt strength from other people. It was almost overwhelming."

## **WICHITA FALLS REFUGE**

In the summer of 1964, Acme Brick Co. transferred him to Wichita Falls in dusty north Texas -- not to get an Oswald out of the Denton-Dallas area, believes Bob Oswald -- but simply because Wichita Falls needed a sales coordinator. Regardless of the motive, the move placed the family in an area that has largely respected their privacy for more than three decades and let them live as ordinary people unburdened by stigma.

"They'd come to the Little League games back in the early days, and they were very reserved," recalls longtime friend Helen Seyler. "They just quietly tried to be a part of the community. I think people respected them for that. ... The nice thing is, they let you live your life in these parts. People know plenty from personal experience about families having black sheep sometimes. They know you can't hold that against someone."

Still, if kindness predominated, snubs and cruelty lurked close. "I guess it happens to us because this thing never goes away completely," observes Robert Oswald's 40-year-old daughter, Cathy.

To this day, Cathy remains leery, bracing herself at parties for the awkward moment or odd comment that might come her way when people learn she's an Oswald. Among the members of her family, she bears the most visible scars. She still can recall the moment 26 years ago at Rider High School when her ninth-grade history teacher, a brash young instructor who doubled as an athletic coach, unexpectedly asked her a question: "Oswald, are you related to Lee Harvey Oswald?"

Her classmates wheeled. Stunned, she could not make her lips move. Instinct accounted for what happened next. She picked up her books and started walking hurriedly for the door.

The teacher turned belligerent: "Oswald, I asked you a question."

Just before she reached the door, the teacher said it: "Cathy Oswald, I better get you out of my class before you assassinate me."

"It knocked the air right out of me," she remembers.

She sobbed in the bathroom. She became accustomed to crying out of sight from crowds. During her freshman year at the local college, as a nominee for queen of a big football game, she stood with her sash on a stage alongside other contestants, awaiting a banal pageant question about hobbies or goals like all the other girls were getting. The master of ceremonies asked instead, "How does it feel to be Lee Harvey Oswald's niece?"

Silence.

"I guess she's not going to respond," the host quipped.

She put down her sash, grabbed her car keys and raced home. "It was the only time I saw my father that hurt and angry," she remembers, but it wasn't her only hurtful moment in the autumn of 1975. A blind date told her, at the end of an otherwise pleasant evening, that while she was sweet and pretty, "I can't handle it that you're an Oswald."

A year earlier, two taunting boys had told her younger brother, Robert, then a seventh-grader, that his uncle had killed a president. He rushed home, crying uncontrollably.

"He thought they were talking about another uncle, one of my brothers," Vada Oswald recalls. "He didn't really know anything about an Uncle Lee. Oh, he knew he had some kind of relative named Lee, but that's all. We'd never sat him down and talked to him about Lee. We just thought the less said, the better -- that the more we could keep him from it, the more it'd be lost."

## LIMITS TO FORGETTING

There are limits to forgetting and losing anything, especially the past. But the middling city of Wichita Falls -- population: 97,000 -- seems as good a spot as any to make the attempt. It looks like a good place to get lost. It lies in an otherwise sparsely populated, generally barren section of north Texas close to the Oklahoma border. The area, called Texoma by its inhabitants, is a kind of cultural and geographic no-man's land.

It is exactly 126 miles from Bob Oswald's brown-brick house here on his quiet middle-class cul-de-sac to his younger brother's grave in their old boyhood metropolis of Fort Worth. It's 126 miles south along a big fat nothin', as some of the locals will tell you -- past the water-leaching mesquite trees and the fallow Texas cattle ranches flat and far as the eye can see, past the plains where a cold wind in November has nothing to block it except shivering man.

In about two hours, you leave the sameness and descend into a tattered, honky-tonk section of Fort Worth, which is when you're close. In the last mile and a half, you go past the tattoo bar, past the body-piercing parlor and the pawnshop, past the taverns, past the Peppermill Lounge and the Cowtown Inn. Then you turn into the cemetery's parking lot, walk up a hill dotted by swaying oaks and sun-burnt patches of grass, and you're there.

"OSWALD," the flat red gravestone reads. At 12 inches by 24 inches, it is the smallest type of marker in the 12 large gardens of Rose Hill Cemetery, difficult to locate, intended to be inconspicuous. Robert Oswald visits the spot unannounced and never with anyone except his wife. "I don't have to be there to be there, if you know what I mean," he says softly.

His two children, now adults, would gain nothing but pain, he thinks, by seeing the small piece of granite. That would hurt him all the more, because Robert carries enough pain for all of his family. Over the years, he has seldom discussed his torment even with his wife, unwilling to burden her. Instead, he'll sit up alone and think and dream his dream of Lee.

"He handles things by himself," says his close friend, Eddie Seyler, a retired budget officer at a local Air Force base. Not long after the Oswald family's 1964 arrival in Wichita Falls, the two men met when Seyler went to buy bricks. Helen Seyler later taught Robert Jr.'s kindergarten class.

The Oswald and Seyler families became close, and the two men began playing golf together in the mid-'60s. They'd ride in the same golf cart, swapping news and jokes. With time, Eddie dared to broach the assassination, asking Robert what he thought of some new theory being advanced by skeptics of the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone.

"Eddie, it's nonsense, I think," Robert would say.

Seyler would press a little deeper.

"Eddie, I believe he was the only one involved."

The years flew by and the theories kept coming. The prosecutor in New Orleans, Jim Garrison, declared he had the real killers of John F. Kennedy in his sights, and a cottage industry of conspiracy books followed. Lee's body was exhumed after someone convinced his widow, Marina, that it was possible the body buried beneath the Oswald tombstone was not Lee's but a spy's. A group of university pathologists studied the corpse and concluded, "Nonsense."

At various points, Eddie Seyler wondered how his close friend was holding up. "You doing OK with this?" Seyler asked him once as they rolled along a golf course.

"Yeah, I'm handling it," Seyler recalls Oswald saying.

"You know, Bob, if you ever want to visit about it-- "

"I'm all right, Eddie. But thanks."

It was what Robert Oswald always said, more or less. Cathy Oswald remembers childhood moments when she had the urge to ask her parents, "Why don't you say something about it? Why don't you ask me something once about what I think about it?... But I have a lot of admiration for them. They wanted to protect us. ... My father had to be carrying a terrible burden. I'm amazed by how he stood up to it."

## **EYES OF A STOIC**

The object of this admiration sighs in his den, eyes fixed on the ceiling. What not even those closest to him might fully understand is the limit of Robert Oswald's stoicism.

"When there's adversity, I'll keep on doing what I have to do -- and then fall apart later, alone," he says. "They're scars. ... But I've endured it basically alone. ... It's the ultimate show of love, I think, that my children don't bring the subject up with me. ... It's for their good. It's for all the family's good. I just don't want my family or friends bothered. You want things copacetic for them."

To enter the impeccably neat and well-furnished Robert Oswald house and stroll through its main rooms is to feel the eerie obliteration of Lee. There are no photos of him among the many happy family shots on the den mantel, nothing that might spark questions or draw stares, nothing to suggest the younger brother ever existed.

Only when a visitor moves toward the other end of the large house does he glimpse the hidden side of Robert Oswald's life, the one reflected in a studio photograph of his late father, flanked by snapshots of Robert and Lee.

That tableau on a bedroom wall serves as a tribute to a father and a pledge not to forget a kid brother. It means quietly loving the brother in his infamy just as in his frustrated anonymity -- from the days when Robert and Lee slept alongside each other in a New Orleans orphanage, to the last moment when Robert stood above his brother's open casket in a Fort Worth cemetery, mumbled a prayer and kissed his cheek.

Now as then, he keeps Lee close. Sometimes he will walk across his den to a small bookcase where -- amid his orderly, shelved books about Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jefferson and other American giants -- there lies, incongruously on its side, an old illustrated children's book with a worn binding.

"My Rip Van Winkle book," Robert says softly. He opens the book and, without warning, there's Lee. It is Lee in pencil -- the boyishly loopy signature of 9-year-old Lee Oswald at a time when his handwriting and psyche were still in flux. It is Lee Oswald in August 1949, two months before his 10th birthday, when he'd taken possession of Rip Van Winkle from his big brother. The signature looks astonishingly fresh, as indelible as Lee himself. When Robert Oswald's fingers run over it, his jaw goes a little slack.

"There but for the grace of God, go I," he sometimes says. He does not mean that he was ever on a path to becoming an assassin, not even toward serious trouble. He means simply that, absent grace and fortune, he may have been pointed like his brother toward a tormented life.

The grace, as he views it, was that he had enough days with his beloved father to acquire an image of himself as a cherished son in whom much had been invested. He was the beneficiary of time that Lee never had because their father died of a heart attack two months before Lee was born, when Robert was already 51/2 years old.

After more than 20 years of declining interviews with newspapers and magazines -- and having had no lengthy discussion of his or Lee's life with any writer since William Manchester interviewed him 33 years ago -- he says he has chosen to talk now partly to help other families that may be trying to cope with an infamous wrong done by a relative.

"My heart just ached when I saw the father and mother of John Hinckley," he says, referring to Ronald Reagan's would-be assassin in 1981. "And you think of what the families of people like Tim McVeigh go through."

## **HONORING AND HUMANIZING**

But the sense grows, in listening to Robert Oswald, that he talks to honor his family's name and to humanize his brother -- the one reduced, by turns over the years, to murderous monster, dumb deviant or pathetic patsy, depending upon whose history one reads and believes.

He seethes over the authors and movie makers whom he believes have pushed conspiracy themes for little more than financial gain. Most notably, he despises Oliver Stone, who "had Lee hanging out with perverts and terrible people, totally misrepresenting the facts of the case and ignoring other things -- the fact that Lee had taken a shot at [retired Maj. Gen. Edwin] Walker,

Lee wanting to go after Nixon, the whole pattern ... of Lee's problems -- just so [Stone] could sell a movie and have Lee looking pathetic, inhuman."

Robert remembers the boyhood Lee who loved to fish. His wife, Vada, recalls the young man who was "so wonderful with children, so sweet," but had "two sides to him." Robert still thinks history has missed the brother whom he knew, the one bereft of a father and mistreated by a mother, a blank slate that got filled in with the wrong things.

"You got all these movies and books that have dehumanized Lee," he seethes. "I can accept that he did what he did, OK? He did a terrible thing, and there's no doubt that he'd become sick. But they don't have to turn him into a nothing. Maybe it sells, but it'd be more meaningful to show him as he really was, and what went wrong. ... If you don't know about our father, you don't know what Lee missed, you don't know the key part of the story."

A life insurance salesman, the boys' father typically finished his days by sitting with Robert on the porch of their small house in New Orleans, contentedly waiting for nothing more pressing than the ice-cream man. Robert's older half brother John -- born to his mother during her first marriage -- would join them, happy to have a devoted stepfather. The man was many things to both boys -- a hugger, a disciplinarian, an earnest and nicely dressed man who had intense interests in boxing and thoroughbred racing.

After Robert Oswald Sr. died at 43, Robert carried around a 5-year-old's idealized picture of the man whom he wanted to emulate. "I had 5 1/2 wonderful years with father and I had memories; Lee had zero time, OK?" he says, repeating the figures -- five, zero. "I don't think we'd be having this conversation if father [had lived] and Lee had had him around. ... We all know that lots of people do OK with just one parent, one good loving parent. ... But let's just say we had a situation that was different."

The "situation" was their mother, Marguerite. A year after the death of her second husband, she placed her two oldest sons, 8-year-old John and 6-year-old Robert, in the first of two orphanage asylums in New Orleans, where they would live for the next four years.

"I recall each time it happened, I had these intense headaches," Robert says. "It came across to me that you're being left, you're being abandoned." He has a vivid recollection of watching his mother drive away from one orphanage. "I was looking out a window and just had tears running down all over the place."

The day after Christmas in 1942, Marguerite Oswald turned over her youngest son, Lee, then 3, to Bethlehem Orphanage Home. Lee lived at the orphanage for more than a year, sleeping at night on a small bed alongside Robert's in a large room crowded with other children. Five years older, Robert served as his baby brother's protector along with John -- who, as the eldest brother, had the additional responsibility of cleaning little Lee when he dirtied his britches. "John was my rock," he recalls, "and we were Lee's."

Robert temporarily lost touch with the woman responsible for their predicament. "There was this one time," he recalls, "when I was allowed to visit my Aunt Lillian, who lived in the area, and this woman came up from behind me and said something, and I said to my cousin, 'Who's that?' He said, 'Your mother.' I've asked myself what made her dump us. I've tried to be as gracious as I can. But through the years, the story -- that times were hard -- doesn't hold up."

## **BRIEFLY BACK TOGETHER**

Before their mother married for the third time, Lee came out of the orphanage, to be joined, a half-year later, by his older brothers. "All that mattered was we were back together, so we were happy," Robert recalls. "We were a family again."

He possesses a small photo of the brothers, taken not long after their reunion. A cherubic, bushy-haired, 5-year-old Lee teeters between the big boys. He is grinning hugely, joyous in the way only a small child can be, an image wrenching in its suggestion of what might have been. Looking at it, Robert alternately smiles and swallows thickly, blue eyes batting hard. "A good time," is all he says.

He wants a visitor to see Lee the boy. He has a sibling's encyclopedic recollection, a meld of the trivial, affectionate, bizarre, comic and arresting about the youngster in the photo as he grew older. Lee had an I.Q. of 118, he says. Lee could not drive. Lee wanted to be a writer. In 1959, fresh out of the Marines, he told Robert he was thinking of going to Cuba to emulate Ernest Hemingway. A week later, he impulsively headed for Russia instead -- which has always made the idea of orchestrated CIA involvement in the president's death fairly laughable to Robert.

Lee the toddler wore hand-me-down knickers in the orphanage. Lee played cowboys and Indians. He liked being Two-Gun Pete.

"There was a lot of love," Robert says, in his den chair. "Lee needed my brother and me."

Sitting in his den, he hears a noise then. He perceives noises that others don't, his senses conditioned over 34 years to remain on guard even when the rest of him is engaged with a guest. He quickly rises and walks out into his back yard, gray hair blowing in the stiff autumn breeze, blue eyes like a hawk now, looking right, looking left, scanning the area beyond his yard and the alley behind it.

"Our neighbors are gone. I'm keeping a watch," he says. "Guess it was nothing." He turns in the direction of the basketball hoop that he has erected for his grandchildren, then turns back for another look. "No, nothing," he says, mostly for himself. "Nothing, Mom," he calls to his wife, who has come to the edge of their porch.

Virtually all his life, Robert Oswald has been a protector, a guardian looking to shield loved ones, a Dad or surrogate Dad for somebody. But there are limits, he knows, to what he can do. Members of his family, when apart from him, have had to fend for themselves.

Once, when he was away in Washington testifying to the Warren Commission about his brother, a peculiar-sounding stranger knocked on the door and told Vada Oswald that he wanted to talk to her husband. The next day the police picked up the man in Dallas, after he made a ruckus over demanding to see the imprisoned Jack Ruby, who had fatally shot Lee on Nov. 24, 1963. "I shook in my boots for a long time after that," Vada remembers.

"It's been hard on Vada at times, especially this time of year," says her close friend of 19 years, Annette Lemley, who lives in the house that the Oswalds are looking after on this day. "You know, 'Oswald' isn't like the name 'Smith.' 'Oswald' has a ring to it. There've been some things said to her over the years. ... People's hearts bled for them when Cathy went through that trouble with her [high-school] teacher. This whole town stood up for them then. ... Robert has been a wonderful friend to us. It's amazing to me to think he had the same upbringing as his brother. But Robert came out stronger. You wonder why."

Robert will tell you that the two brothers' upbringings were as different as night and day once they escaped that orphanage. The boys moved to Fort Worth and then Dallas to live with their



mother's new husband, an engineer from Boston named Edwin Ekdahl. This union, like those before, was brief. Marguerite's third marriage lasted only three years, and in its first year, after being thwarted in an effort to place Robert and John back in the Bethlehem orphanage, she sent them off to a military academy in Mississippi.

"I felt dumped again," Robert says, "But, looking back, it was the best thing that could have happened to us. We were around caring people who gave us values, discipline and love -- and we were away from her. Soon, Ekdahl was gone and Lee was alone with mother, which was difficult. ... She tolerated people only for as long as they could do something for her."

## **START OF THE SPIRAL**

He believes Lee's spiral began there and then.

Over the next 18 years, something obviously went terribly wrong with the boy in the picture, Robert says, looking blankly at his old Rip Van Winkle book. He sees a maelstrom of craziness and his mother's harebrained, "selfish" decisions -- most notably a gypsy trip with 13-year-old Lee out of Texas to New York City. There, in Robert's words, his mother hoped to "mooch off" John, by then married and stationed in the Coast Guard at a New York port.

John threw out his mother and half brother after Lee threatened John's wife, Marge, with a knife. The boy became a chronic truant, hanging out at the Bronx Zoo. A New York school psychiatrist told Marguerite that her son's behavior was a protest against her neglect and the absence of any real family life. School officials said they'd put Lee in a special program for truants.

Time for another gypsy trip: She fled to New Orleans with her son.

"There's a big gap with Lee after that," Robert says.

Lee's doings became ever murkier. A stint in the Marines. The move to Russia. Renunciation of his American citizenship. A pledge of loyalty to communism. He came home in June 1962, frail-looking, with a wife and daughter in tow -- after Robert had wired him \$200 for the final leg of his plane flight.

That autumn, a husband and father himself, Robert tried to go a distance toward reuniting the Oswalds. On Thanksgiving, having carefully excluded their mother from the guest list, he brought Lee and John together for the first time in nine years, since just after Lee had threatened John's wife. The date was Nov. 22, 1962, exactly one year before the assassination of President Kennedy. It would be the last time that Robert saw Lee before his younger brother's arrest in Dallas.

Robert Oswald possesses his own short home movie of the Thanksgiving holiday, which he presents to a visitor with characteristic understatement, remarking, "I've got something you might want to see." Remarkably, the Warren Commission never viewed the footage because Robert had forgotten about it, and the investigative commission never asked him to turn over photographs or films.

The silent movie, in washed-out color, shows Lee Oswald -- in brown pants, white shirt and a gray vest -- sitting on an end of a couch in Robert's living room. Lee's head is cocked slightly to the side, smiling at sweet, blond, 5-year-old Cathy Oswald, who is dancing and cutting up for the adults' amusement. John's wife has taken a seat at the opposite end of the couch from Lee. John is in the middle, grinning between the old antagonists.

Lee's head then turns back from the pretty dancing girl. His lynx-eyed wife, Marina, has materialized on the armrest alongside, talking to him. He points out the camera to her without ever quite looking at her, leaning back then ever so slightly, a polite but remote figure, staring with a tight smile straight ahead. He suddenly seems distanced from the frivolity.

Near the end of the movie, Robert sits down on the floor directly in front of Lee, holding Robert's own 2-year-old son, Robert Jr., in his lap. The mender of the Oswald family smiles beatifically for the camera. Then the film ends, only 1 minute and 15 seconds after it began -- the screen suddenly black, Lee gone.

"I was feeling good," Robert reflects. "We didn't talk about politics or anything heavyweight that day. Just family stuff. Enjoying each other and the kids."

"But Lee showed you different sides," Vada Oswald interjects.

The smile slowly leaves Robert Oswald's face. "Yes" is all he can say for a long moment. Then he stands and puts Rip Van Winkle back on the bookcase.

In early 1963, the brick company transferred Robert to Malvern, Ark. He received a letter from Lee in mid-March. The return address listed a post office box in Dallas.

Dear Robert,

... Well how is everyone adjusting to the new city? I've never been to Ark. as I don't know how it looks, but somehow I got the impresstion it must be something like Belerussia, pine forest, ect., Marina says where there are pine forest, the air is very good, which will be good for the kids.

June Lee was a year old in Feb....

My work is very nice, I will get a rise in pay next month, and I have become adept at my photographic work...

We don't have a phone, and we have moved to the new apartment just March 2nd so it would be better for you to write me at the P.O. Box since I shall always have it. Well, write soon. Maybe send me some pictures of the senery.

XXX

Lee

Lee sent Robert a birthday card in April. In September, Acme again transferred Robert, to its Denton plant. Robert wrote Lee a letter saying he had returned to Texas. "I told him we were back, but that we didn't have any address for him except his post-office box," he recalls. "I wrote, 'Let me know where you and the family are living so we can get together.' "

He never received an answer. "Lee wasn't at that photographic place anymore," he remembers. "I didn't know where he was working or what he was doing."

Lee Oswald turned 24 in October 1963. There was no way to wish him happy birthday. Robert did not know that Lee and Marina had essentially split up. He did not know that Lee had gone to Mexico City in late September and paid a visit to the Soviet Embassy. Remembering that happy Thanksgiving of 1962, he assumed he would see Lee again when his younger brother got around to making contact.

"I've lost sleep thinking about that period," he says. "We know now his marriage was gruesome. We know he had all kinds of problems. I just think if I'd known. ..." He stares up at the ceiling, unable to finish the thought.

Nov. 22, 1963, started out to be just another Friday. If a scheduled meeting and luncheon with some of his bosses had not prevented it, Robert Oswald might have driven into Dallas and watched the presidential motorcade. He was a Barry Goldwater supporter, although he had voted for Kennedy over Richard Nixon in 1960. Politics aside, it would have been special, he thought, to see a president up close.

As he and the bosses were preparing to leave the restaurant, a cashier told them the president had been shot. During midafternoon, distracted like most of America, he tried doing some paperwork in his office while half listening to reports of the assassination coming from a radio in the receptionist's area. Suddenly, he thought he heard the name "Oswald." Did the announcer say "Harvey Lee Oswald" or "Lee Harvey Oswald?"

He remembers walking toward that radio as the receptionist stared at him. The announcer said something about the shooting of a Dallas policeman named Tippit. Then, Robert heard the other name again: Oswald. Lee Harvey Oswald.

"Something must have shown in my face," he recalls, "because this receptionist took a look at me and started crying."

"That's my kid brother," Robert Oswald said to no one in particular.

## **AT THE POLICE STATION**

At 3:15 the next afternoon on the fifth floor of the Dallas police headquarters, he saw Lee, who had been formally charged with the assassination of the president and the murder of patrol officer J.D. Tippit. The brothers spoke over telephones separated by a glass partition with reinforced wire.

Lee had a black eye. Robert asked him if he was being treated all right.

Lee said he was fine, then gestured at his phone. "It's tapped," he said.

"It may or may not be, Lee."

It was a conversation between a big brother and his flighty little brother. For a while, Robert tried not to bring up the unthinkable. They talked about family matters, with Robert wondering aloud why Lee had not answered his September letter or mentioned the birth of his second daughter, Rachel.

"You know how that goes," Lee said.

"Whatever," Robert answered.

Finally, Robert asked it: "Lee, what the Sam Hill is going on?"

"What are you talking about?"

"They got you charged with shooting a police officer and murdering the president. They got your rifle and they got your pistol."

"Don't believe all that so-called evidence."

The casualness of the response triggered something in Robert, who stared hard into his brother's eyes. As he remembers, "I was pretty intense. I was looking for some kind of reaction from him, anything, plus, minus, anything. ... But there wasn't any expression at all. ... He knew why I was looking in his eyes. He said, 'Brother, you won't find anything there.' And he was right. There was nothing."

Lee told him not to come up to the jail so much that "you get yourself in trouble with your boss. ... You stay out of this."

"I can't," Robert said. "I've already been dragged into it."

He told Lee goodbye and said he'd see him soon.

Robert talked to the Secret Service sometime that day -- touched to learn that Jacqueline Kennedy had inquired about the background of his family -- and asked that his condolences be relayed to her. His voice broke. A Secret Service agent said he understood.

That afternoon, he climbed into his car that still had its Arkansas license plate and drove 90 minutes north to the farm of his wife's family in Keeter, Texas. After making sure his two children were in another room, he told his wife and in-laws what he knew, giving voice for the first time to his fears over what the mounting evidence might say about his brother. He began sobbing.

"A lot of tears and hugs," he remembers. "You appreciate more than ever the family in those moments. ... And Lee was my family, too. I didn't know exactly what to believe yet. ... I thought there'd be time to talk more to him, to find out. ... You always think there'll be more time and that you'll be there seeing him soon."

### **SOBS AND A SNEER**

The next day, Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald to death on live television. Hearing the news at Parkland Hospital, Robert cried. A gruff Secret Service official told him, "What do you expect? Violence breeds violence."

His nerves were close to snapping. The next morning, while under protection by the Secret Service at the Inn of the Six Flags in nearby Arlington, Robert learned that no minister in the Dallas area would agree to perform a funeral service for his brother. Two strangers in clerical collars suddenly appeared in the Secret Service's hotel room. Robert repeated that he wanted a brief chapel service.

The ministers listened intently. Then one asked, "Robert, what about you?"

"What about me what?"

"Are you involved?"

Stunned, he turned and walked out of the room, suspecting to this day that the men were Secret Service agents. The agency interrogated him for most of the next week in the hotel. "I think I would have had one heck of a time, as it turned out, had I been in Dallas on the day of the assassination," he says. "There'd been all kinds of theories and questions."

After a few weeks, the Secret Service cleared him of suspicion. The nightmare seemed to be winding down. His brother had been buried without a chapel service on a chill, gray Monday, with reporters plucked out of a knot of onlookers to serve as pallbearers.

His sister-in-law Marina had left with her two children and her own Secret Service detail. She soon sold Lee's Russian diary for \$20,000 and hawked photos of her late husband with his guns. His mother -- who had not seen Lee for more than a year before the assassination -- went home to peddle her interviews, calling herself "the mother of history" while simultaneously claiming Lee was an intelligence agent who'd been framed. Robert went back to the brick lot.

Of course, it wasn't finished. He could barely sleep for six months. He drove alone to the farm of his wife's family so that he could test-fire his rifle and consider whether Lee could have fired three shots in the time it took to wound the president and then kill him. In the end, he decided it was do-able.

The '60s turned bloodier. When Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were slain in 1968, he agonized over the sense that the assassination of President Kennedy had "opened a window" through which disturbed men everywhere had realized the possibilities for political killings. "It is real hard for me to think that my brother might have given people the idea," he says.

"Never going to be finished," he says today, philosophical about this truth, having found ways over the years to be amused by his life's darkly comic moments. About two years after the assassination, he was filling out a registration card at a Dallas hotel when the desk clerk took a look at his last name and turned pale.

"I thought you were dead," she said.

Oswald dead-panned: "Pinch me and we'll see."

He hoped the passage of time would cool passions. He wrote a book about his brother, used the royalties to attend college and earned a degree in 1970. He was readying himself for commencement exercises when a clerk in the registrar's office took one look at his name on a diploma form -- Robert Edward Lee Oswald. She said sideways to him, "I'd really get rid of that 'Lee' if I were you."

He said nothing.

Thirty-four years of restraint and dignity have carried him and his family to safe ground, in this immaculate den, after an odyssey no one else will ever fully understand. "They're just normal people like the rest of us, I guess," says his backdoor neighbor Bob Lemley -- a remark that the retired Robert Oswald regards as pleasant news. "I guess it's worked out," he drawls.

His son, Robert, a thriving 36-year-old businessman who happily cruises around town in a cowboy hat, now has his own little Robert Oswald. Daughter Cathy long ago married a teaching tennis professional and lives an upscale life as a mother of three, with her house's remodeling and the kids' tennis tournaments to preside over. "Things are copacetic," Robert Oswald likes to say.

But sometimes when the big house goes dark, the strange dream returns. Lee is still there. And Robert is waiting for him. He remains the loving brother of the boy whose hand he held in the orphanage, the protector who swore to look after both his family's name and the small child his father never knew. He watches Lee tear up the paper. It cannot be fathomed, but all these years later, he has come to peace with it.